

The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

San Jose quietly building a green reputation

By Tracy Seipel
tseipel@mercurynews.com

Posted: 09/28/2009 07:02:45 AM PDT

Updated: 09/28/2009 07:25:29 AM PDT

Related Sections

- [Green Energy: All about alternative energy](#)
- [Green Living: Consumer-oriented news you can use for a greener lifestyle](#)

When San Jose last week became the largest city in the country to effectively ban plastic grocery bags and most paper bags, many observers might have been surprised.

After all, similar efforts have failed — or backfired — in more liberal cities such as Seattle and San Francisco.

But to those who have been watching San Jose's growing environmental agenda over the years, the sudden publicity surrounding the effort merely cements the city's reputation as a player in the environmental and green technology movements.

"It's a lot like the tortoise and the hare," said Warner Chabot, chief executive of the California League of Conservation Voters. "There are cities where the hare is jumping up and getting a lot of media and publicity. San Jose has been the tortoise, quietly and modestly plodding along but getting to the finish line with less flash and more solid results."

That much was illustrated in the methodical process leading up to the City Council's plastic bag vote. San Jose's environmental services staff early on recognized issues that had wounded others. For instance, San Francisco had banned plastic bags only to see shoppers turn to paper bags, the manufacture of which produces an immense amount of greenhouse gases.

Meanwhile, many other efforts to ban single-use plastic grocery bags had been stalled by plastics industry groups such as [SaveThePlasticBag.com](#), which has sued cities that had not completed environmental impact reports before enacting bans.

By contrast, a ban in San Jose won't take effect until its environmental review is complete and local residents and businesses are given ample time to weigh in. Assuming that process goes according to plan, the ban — which would bar retailers from handing out free plastic bags and allow only paper bags made with 40 percent recycled material, and then only for a fee — won't kick in until 2011.

To be sure, things might not go according to plan. Stephen Joseph, the attorney representing [SaveThePlasticBag.com](#), predicts the environmental review will show the proposed ban is not justified. "There's no ban until an ordinance is voted on," he said.

And San Jose has seen some of its green-energy dreams go awry before. Electric carmaker Tesla Motors' plans to build a 500-worker auto assembly plant here died earlier this year for financial and other reasons.

But John Stuffelbean, the city's environmental services manager, said careful deliberation of the bag issue has positioned San Jose to succeed where others have stumbled. "We heard every possible issue we could think of," he said. "We involved a lot

Advertisement

Find local companies rated Highest in Quality

Read rating scores and survey comments of top rated companies.




Quality • Satisfaction • Trust

Go To www.DiamondCertified.org



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

of different people from a lot of different perspectives, and we addressed each of them."

That pragmatic and consensus-driven approach is a hallmark of Mayor Chuck Reed. While he may not be as well-known as other California politicians, since taking office in 2007 the former environmental lawyer has pushed a "Green Vision" agenda of goals he wants the city to achieve by 2022. Among them are reducing per-capita energy use by 50 percent; obtaining 100 percent of the city's electrical power from renewable energy sources; and recycling or reusing 100 percent of the city's wastewater.

Reed and the city's progressive environmental bent mesh well in Silicon Valley, where many prominent companies such as Hewlett-Packard, Applied Materials and Cisco, among others, see the economic opportunity of strong environmental values. (The current Newsweek magazine's inaugural Green Rankings of 500 U.S. companies includes a number of valley companies.) Reed also has worked to lure companies focused on solar energy and other "green" efforts to a "clean-tech" district in the Edenvale neighborhood, with an eye toward creating thousands of "green-collar" jobs.

If anything, Chabot said, the fact that San Jose is not perceived as a radical city like Berkeley makes last week's vote an even stronger political statement. "It shows that any city that looks objectively at the economic and environmental (impact) of this policy will come to the same conclusion," he said.

The vote also may cast a broader light on San Jose's record of environmental achievements. Darby Hoover, senior resource specialist for the Natural Resources Defense Council in San Francisco, noted that "for such a large city, my perception is that people are often not aware of San Jose and its efforts."

But she said the city is acknowledged in environmental circles for its "foresight" about recycling, which it began decades ago and for which it is recognized as a national leader.

Like other cities, San Jose also is developing a climate action plan that will map out how to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the decades to come. In May, a climate action plan that took two years to assemble in Berkeley was rejected by the City Council after its costly recommendations outraged many citizens.

Again, Stufflebean said, San Jose has learned from that example.

"The lesson is to fully engage the public as you make these big policy decisions," he said. "San Jose has a history of doing that very well."

Contact Tracy Seipel at 408-275-0104.

Advertisement

Find local companies rated Highest in Quality

Read rating scores and survey comments of top rated companies.





Quality • Satisfaction • Trust

Go To www.DiamondCertified.org



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™